Beyond Judging Books by Their Covers: Reflections on "Interrogating Cultural Anthropology Text Covers"

Naomi S. Baron

Why place covers on books? The most obvious reason is to protect the pages. But what do you put on the covers themselves? Answers to the "what" question have evolved over the nearly two millennia since the birth of the codex. To situate the use—and user interpretation—of contemporary covers, particularly for textbooks, let's start with some history.[1]

From Book Covers to Book Jackets–and Back to Covers

We begin in medieval Europe, where manuscript production was labor-intensive and book ownership was relatively rare. Bound pages typically had embossed leather bindings, sometimes bedecked with precious stones, ivory, or threads of gold or silver; these adornments befit the book's valued status. With the coming of print in the West in the mid-15th century, the extra trappings were largely dispensed with, leaving coverings of just embossed leather.

Those embossings were essentially decorative, not linguistic. Only in the 16th century did title pages begin appearing (inside)—with the work's title, author, and publisher—and did titles start showing up on the outside, commonly on the spine. Next followed several centuries when books were generally sold without external coverings, enabling purchasers to select the kind of leather and embossing they wished (and could afford). Accordingly, there was no uniform cover content.

But in the early 1800s, publishing practices changed. Binding became part of the manufacturing process. Leather bindings gave way to fabric, with embossed illustrations and, importantly, the book's title displayed on the front and spine. Another 19th-century development was the addition of book jackets, designed to protect books while in transit from the press to the purchaser. The jackets themselves typically contained the same (or similar) textual and illustrative material to what appeared on the fabric cover.

By the early 1930s, publishers moved to economize by only having one place for illustrations. Since printing on fabric covers was expensive, artwork was now displayed only on the paper jackets, leaving most books with blank front and back covers, and only title, author, and maybe publisher embossed on the fabric spine. These practices typify hardcover books today.

What about paperbacks? A precursor of modern paperbacks were the "yellowbacks" or "penny dreadfuls" that appeared in England in the 1830s. Short, inexpensive, and commonly with lurid covers, they provided entertainment for the growing ranks of often newly literate.

Visible
Language

55 · 3

Naomi S. Baron

*Beyond Judging Books by Their Covers
Reflections on "Interrogating Cultural
Anthropology Text Covers"*

1 4

However, the real paperback breakthrough came in 1935 when Allen Lane co-founded Penguin Books, bringing high-quality literature to paperback format. Since there was only one (paper) cover, it bore all the linguistic and illustrative information.

"Quality paperbacks" soon competed with traditional hardbacks, in both the trade and education markets. We turn now to the latter—textbooks, both hardback and paper.

Textbooks

Back in the day when I was in secondary school, our task as students on the first day of the academic year was to make paper covers for the school-owned, hardback textbooks we were issued. Generally, we fashioned covers out of paper grocery bags, though sometimes from a roll of brown kraft paper. The goal was to protect the books, which were passed on annually to other students. But as a result, whatever information—linguistic or graphic—was on the books' covers was hidden from view.

Since college students (at least in the US) procure their own course materials, the approach has been different in higher education. Students are free to put covers on their own books, or not. In my student days, for books that received considerable wear (such as my calculus text and, later, my *Old English Grammar*), the usual covering of choice was pre-made, partially-opaque, plastic covers. We could make out images that lay underneath, but rarely did we bother looking, except to ensure we grabbed the right book.

In college, the notion of what counts as a textbook is more complex than in secondary education. Some "textbooks" are actually what some of us have come to call "book books," meaning books that the larger public might purchase, such as Homer's *Iliad* or Yuval Noah Harari's *Sapiens*. When these books are included on reading lists in higher education courses, overwhelmingly, students buy the paperback version. Depending upon the year of publication, publisher, or discipline, the cover might bear an illustration relevant to the book's subject matter (for the *Iliad*, maybe a Greek soldier as depicted on a red figure vase) or simply text (also used on some editions of the *Iliad*). A single course, particularly in the humanities or social sciences, might require students to purchase a number of "book books."

Other "textbooks," like that calculus book, constitute the sole (or at least main) material for the entire term. They might come in hardback or, these days, often in paper. Again, year of publication, publisher, and discipline influence what appears on the cover. The cover of my calculus text bore only very boring lettering, though these days, even for

mathematics texts, there is more effort to add eye-catching graphics. Gone are dust jackets, so on hardback and paper alike, the cover is the only place for messaging.

Messaging on Textbook Covers

Understandably, textbook publishers are focused on selling books. While students are the ultimate consumers, it is faculty members who select the textbooks students are asked to acquire. Faculty choices might be driven by a host of factors, including the book's content and the stature of its author(s).

Take Paul A. Samuelson's classic textbook, *Economics*, currently in its 20th edition (and now co-authored by William D. Nordhaus). For decades, it was the go-to introductory economics text. (A longtime professor at MIT, Samuelson was also the first American to win the Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences. Nordhaus, a professor at Yale, received a Nobel award in 2018.) Over the years, the editions have sported a variety of cover designs, from simple text to wind turbines to a map of the Western Hemisphere to a crowd scene to Mondrian-style art. But besides updates and new co-authors, the material remains largely the same. If covers keep changing for subsequent editions of highly similar textbook content, what can we say about semantic relationships between covers (especially those with pictorial artwork) and the subject matter of the books themselves?

When it comes to cover art selection, decision-making ultimately rests with publishers—a reality not just in the textbook market, but for academic and trade titles as well. As the author of nine books (including both academic and trade), only twice have I been consulted on cover issues. Factors over which authors have no control include publishers' budgets (e.g., for commissioning new artwork or buying rights to reproduce existing illustrations) and editors' judgments as to what design will help drive sales.

Assume, for the moment, that a textbook publisher is planning a large print run on an introductory text and therefore willing to commit ample resources for artwork. To what extent does the publisher create a cover for the purpose of conveying information about the book's (and, derivatively, the subject area's) content? Of equal importance is the question, how do student readers perceive this messaging? These are the kinds of questions that Joyce Hammond and her co-authors addressed in studying the covers of college textbooks for introductory courses on cultural anthropology.

Visible
Language

55 · 3

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Beyond Judging Books by Their Covers
Reflections on "Interrogating Cultural
Anthropology Text Covers"

1 6

Interrogating Cultural Anthropology Text Covers

Hammond's discipline of cultural anthropology occupies a visually fertile domain for textbook covers. By contrast, an informal survey of my own bookshelves, plus cover photos on Amazon, confirmed that covers of introductory-level textbooks in fields like linguistics, philosophy, or mathematics are frequently "illustrated" with only abstract geometric or type-based designs.

Hammond's study of textbook covers begins with the assumption that "a text's cover is likely to shape students' initial impressions about cultural anthropology." She goes on to explain that the purpose of her research is to "foster a greater awareness of the messages that text covers may convey to students new to anthropology" (Hammond et al., 2009, p. 150).

The article reports on a content analysis of 47 covers of introductory cultural anthropology texts, along with results from focus groups in which students were shown a subset of those covers and asked to discuss such issues as what the covers conveyed to students about cultural anthropology and how effective the covers were at transmitting that information. Another group of participants provided individual responses to questions. Nearly all the covers in the set of 47 included colorful pictorial illustrations.

Of interest to us here are not the details of the content analysis or student responses,[2] but two presuppositions that underlie the study. The first is that the books' covers were intended (here, by the publishers) to convey information regarding what the field of cultural anthropology is about. The second presupposition is that students seek meaning from textbook covers in the first place.

## Presupposition 1: Publishers' Intended Meaning

There is an Indian parable about the blind men and the elephant. None of the men had encountered such a beast before. They all laid their hands on different parts of the body. Depending upon the part touched, each man derived a different interpretation of what kind of creature it was. The person who felt the trunk said an elephant must be like a snake. The one feeling the ear likened the elephant to a fan, and so on. Each substituted his findings about one aspect of the animal for the whole.

In much the same way, pictorial textbook covers that attempt to represent the conceptual material in a book can only hope to reference part of the contents. Take, for example, the cover of Lyle Campbell's *Historical Linguistics: An Introduction*. The cover is bedecked with a majestic Mesoamerican glyph, but gives no indication that the subject

of historical linguistics was largely defined by evolution of Indo-European languages on the other side of the globe.
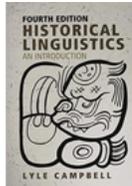
Similarly, the cover of Janet Holmes and Nick Wilson's *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics* displays what appear to be traditional Ethiopian figures. However, the images could equally be referencing cultural anthropology, African history, or social diversity. Moreover, they give no indication that the book involves language use by those pictured or anyone else.

In Hammond's analysis of cultural anthropology textbook covers, some study participants indicated they didn't understand what messages particular covers were intended to express. Equally telling, when asked what kind of cover best conveyed what the field of cultural anthropology was about, half of the focus group members judged the "ideal" cover to contain four or more images, in some sort of collage (Hammond et al., 2009, p. 163). This approach presumably would help overcome the "part for the whole" problem.

Presupposition 2: Do Students Seek Meaning from Textbook Covers?

Hammond's second presupposition about textbook cover design is that students look to derive meaning from these covers. When I was in middle and high school, we likely didn't, since the books went under wraps the day they were issued to us.

What about college students?

Consider printed texts of the sort Hammond discusses, all bearing cover art. Hammond's research directed study participants to seek meaning in the covers they were shown. But what happens with students in the normal course of a semester? They may glance at the covers, but do they "see" them? My strong hunch is that most students using print textbooks largely ignore the covers. To test this hypothesis, a simple experiment could ask students towards the end of a semester what was on the cover of their textbooks. I suspect the responses would reveal sketchy memories at best.

Hammond's study was published in 2009. We might well wonder how her research questions and findings would differ if she undertook her study today. Between then and now, college textbooks underwent a sea change, heavily shifting from print to digital (Baron, 2021). Yes, digital books have cover designs, but in practical terms, they remain more hidden than my high school, kraft paper-covered, American history text.

Digital Book Covers:

Pragmatically an Oxymoron?

Think for a moment about digital books in general. One advantage they have over print is the privacy they afford from potentially prying eyes. Unlike the cover of a print book you're reading on a bus, plane, or park bench, the cover of the same digital text isn't visible to others. It was no accident that when E. L. James' bestselling erotic novel *Fifty Shades of Grey* first appeared, it was only available digitally.

Even if you're not concerned about onlookers judging your literary taste, you can still be affected by the tangible properties of print: its size, heft, paper quality. And cover. A *New Yorker* cartoon reminds us how powerful the physical presence of a book can be. In the cartoon, two men are sitting at the beach. One turns to the other and says, "I got tired of 'Moby-Dick' taunting me from my bookshelf, so I put it on my Kindle and haven't thought of it since" (William Haefeli, September 3, 2012, p. 51).

What about digital textbooks and their covers? Consider this observation posted on a Colorado State University blog:

— Yes, electronic versions still can have "cover" images at the beginning, but they don't have nearly the same effect as the bold, weird, and random covers of printed textbooks, peeking out from bookshelves and staring us in the face every time we sit down to study. (Colorado State University Online, n.d.)

A primary reason that digital textbook covers have more limited effect than paper is that digital ones are barely seen.

Even pre-pandemic, textbook publishers were aggressively developing new digital publishing models (Baron, 2019). In summer 2019, the textbook giant Pearson announced a "digital first" policy, whereby digital materials would have publishing priority, fewer new editions of print textbooks would appear, and prices for print would be relatively high. Meanwhile, "inclusive access" policies of publishers such as Cengage and McGraw-Hill give students digital access to course textbooks—for a

bundled reduced price, which students pay to their schools as a course fee, and then schools pass on to the publisher.

Come the pandemic, classes moved not just to virtual learning but overwhelmingly to digital reading. Some of these texts were available as open educational resources (OERs) or materials simply appearing online, but others were digital versions of commercial print textbooks. Regardless of how students accessed their texts, I doubt these readers spent much—if any—time contemplating the digital covers. As with the experiment I suggested for print textbooks, it would be interesting to ask students towards the end of the course what was on their digital textbook's cover. My hunch is that recall would be even lower than for the print scenario. And if you can't remember, you can't interpret the designer's intended meaning.

The Future of Textbook Covers

As the author of nine "book books" whose readership includes college students, I have always cared what my covers look like, even when I have little or no say in their design. While the publishers' goal is sales, my own desire for covers is both to intrigue potential readers and to offer clues as to the volumes' contents.

Yet as a longtime university teacher, I have no illusions that even the most inviting book covers are normally taken by students to have semantic importance regarding course content. Now that text materials are increasingly digital, I wonder how many students recall ever having seen the cover. Could they pick it out from a line-up?

For the foreseeable future, both print and digital textbooks will continue to have cover art. However, those of us who teach need to be realistic about the impact of such designs. Publishers will still control the artwork. Authors will continue wanting input. Faculty members doing book selection will remain the primary audience for what's on those covers.

The end users—students—will likely be the least invested in the covers' content. Particularly given the digital turn, perhaps one saving grace is less reason to worry students will be judging books by their covers.

Naomi S. Baron

Visible Language 55 · 3 *Beyond Judging Books by Their Covers Reflections on "Interrogating Cultural Anthropology Text Covers"* 2 0

Notes

1. This historical sketch draws heavily upon the series of blog posts from Graphéine Graphic Design (2017), *A short history of book covers.*

2. See Hammond et al. (2009) for discussion of findings.

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Author

Naomi S. Baron is Professor Emerita of Linguistics at American University in Washington, DC. She is a former Guggenheim Fellow, Fulbright Fellow, and Visiting Scholar at the Stanford Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences. For more than thirty years she has been studying the effects of technology on language, including the ways we speak, listen, read, write, and think. Her earlier books include *Always On: Language in an Online and Mobile World* (2008) and *Words Onscreen: The Fate of Reading in a Digital World* (2015). Her newest book is *How We Read Now: Strategic Choices for Print, Screen, and Audio* (2021). Presently she is exploring how artificial intelligence is reshaping what it means to write.